

THE PRESENT STATUS OF BREWER'S BLACKBIRD IN THE
SOUTHEAST

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On November 25, 1930, while crossing an open field in the wide fertile valley of the Mills River, near Asheville, North Carolina, I saw a large blackbird feeding near me that I first thought was a grackle. Something about its appearance, however, aroused my curiosity. There was no apparent reason why its identity should puzzle me, yet I felt instinctively that something about it differed from the blackbirds with which I was familiar. So I collected it and found that it was a male Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). Subsequent search that evening of what literature was available dealing with the birds of North Carolina revealed the fact that there was no other record for this species in the State. Accordingly I considered it merely one of those accidental occurrences that at one time or another can involve almost any species and, while gratified at having added the bird to the North Carolina list, attached no other importance to this unexpected record.

The following spring, on April 6, 1931, while I was driving by a large pasture midway between Swannanoa and the town of Black Mountain, and approximately twelve miles east of Asheville, two blackbirds that were feeding a little apart from a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds in the same field attracted my attention. Looking at them through my binoculars I saw at once that they were Brewer's Blackbirds, a male and a female. On my approach they flew into the top of a near-by tree, where the male uttered notes suggesting those of the grackle and quite unlike those of the Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), which the Brewer's Blackbird more closely resembles. That there might be no question of my identification, the male was collected and this species definitely recorded for the State for the second time.

With the additional occurrence of this western bird in western North Carolina I now wondered if it might not prove to be a regular migrant there, overlooked in past years by other observers. On this supposition I devoted considerable time that fall (1931) to a more or less thorough search of all spots suitable for this species, and by early December was convinced that my suspicions were well justified.

The first birds, a flock of ten in which both sexes were in equal numbers, were seen on November 16, and during the following three weeks other flocks of varying sizes were noted almost daily. At times

individual birds were found feeding alone, but usually four to eight birds comprised the flocks that were seen, and it was not uncommon to find as many as fifteen or twenty individuals together. They were seemingly rather exacting in their requirements, showing a decided preference for open fields and pastures but almost invariably remaining close to barns and farm houses. While such conditions attracted other blackbirds, Brewer's Blackbirds rarely associated with them, feeding a little apart and appearing entirely satisfied with their own company. In common with the Cowbirds they seemed to prefer the vicinity of cattle or horses and were frequently found in such situations. On December 8, 1931, four birds, all males, were seen at the edge of an old apple orchard in the open Mills River valley. These were the last of this species noted that fall.

As spring approached I again made the occurrence of these birds in this region one of my special objectives, and I found them as plentiful as they had been the preceding fall. A single bird, a female, appeared on February 25, 1932; within a week small flocks were observed almost daily, and as late as April 12 two birds, a male and a female, were seen feeding about cows in a pasture.

In the fall of 1932 the first birds, a male and two females, were seen on November 14 in a field near Swannanoa, and soon afterwards small flocks were of common occurrence. Early in December the bulk of this species had gone; but a few individuals were noted at irregular intervals during the month, and as late as December 26 two males were seen feeding at the edge of a stream in a marshy field.

As it gradually became evident that Brewer's Blackbird actually was not only a regular but a common migrant in the mountains of western North Carolina, I became curious as to the whereabouts of this species during the winter months. The fourth edition of the A. O. U. Check-List gives the winter range as "southern British Columbia and Wisconsin and Kansas south to Guatemala. Casual in Illinois, Missouri, Louisiana, Southern Florida and South Carolina." Inquiry revealed the fact that there were no definite records for Florida, and that the inclusion of that State in the range of this species was open to question. For South Carolina there are three published records. Leverett M. Loomis first recorded this western bird in the State after collecting five specimens from a flock of a dozen found at Chester, on December 9 and 10, 1886 (*Auk*, Vol. IV, p. 76, 1887). Forty years later Prof. Franklin Sherman and George E. Hudson found this species at Clemson College, collecting a male on April 17, 1926, and a male and a female from a flock of twenty on December 18, 1926 (*Auk*, Vol.

XLIV, p. 567, 1927). Even these few records indicate that Brewer's Blackbirds passed through at least the Piedmont region of South Carolina in past migrations, and it seemed rather surprising that they were not observed oftener or were not recorded at all south of Chester or Clemson College. As the birds had appeared with such regularity and in such relatively large numbers each spring and fall for the past three years about Asheville, I could not help but feel that unquestionably they wintered regularly somewhere in Georgia or Florida. That this assumption was warranted, at least in part, seemed evident on a short field trip I made to Augusta, Georgia, the latter part of November, 1932. While I have no way of knowing whether I was too early or too late to observe the majority of these birds in Georgia, I experienced little difficulty in locating a flock of ten that were feeding, on the morning of November 30, in an open pasture a few miles north of Augusta. A female collected that day is the first definite record for the occurrence of this species in the State.

While it is true that the present status of Brewer's Blackbird south of Augusta is still a matter of conjecture, it would seem now that the birds have been overlooked. To one familiar with the bird this may appear rather surprising, for despite its general resemblance to both the Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) and the Rusty Blackbird, its notes are quite distinctive and its appearance in the field almost equally so on close scrutiny. However, when one remembers the vast hordes of blackbirds that winter in southern Georgia and Florida, the ease with which a species associating with these immense flocks could escape observation is more readily apparent. It is well known that in recent years Brewer's Blackbird has been extending its breeding range eastward, and this may account in some degree for its present abundance in western North Carolina. That it actually winters in fairly large numbers south of these mountain valleys seems now to be an established fact, and it will be interesting for bird students to determine in future years just where these birds go, and to attempt to answer the question of why they have heretofore so completely escaped observation.

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